

**COLOMBIA'S CONFLICTS:
THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS
OF A WIDER WAR**

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FOREWORD

This is the first in a new Special Series of monographs that stems from the February 2001 and the March 2002 conferences—co-sponsored by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College and The Dante B. Fascell North-South Center of the University of Miami—that dealt with the “Implementation of *Plan Colombia*.” This similar but different series begins a transition of focus from Colombia’s specific crises to broader regional and global security concerns, and the upcoming conference in March 2003 entitled “Shaping the Regional Security Environment in Latin America.”

Colombia’s Conflicts: The Spillover Effects of a Wider War, written by Dr. Richard L. Millett, is the lead monograph for the new series. This timely monograph provides a careful examination of the problems generated by Colombia’s three simultaneous wars against illegal drug traffickers, insurgents, and self-appointed paramilitary groups. All seek, in one way or another, violently to change or depose the state. All use the uncontrolled “gray areas” in Colombia and its neighboring states to sustain, conduct, and replenish their nefarious operations without risk of significant interference. And, all these violent illegal entities constitute threats to stability and security that extend beyond Colombia and Latin America to Europe and the United States. Colombia is therefore a paradigm of the failing state that has enormous implications for U.S. foreign policy and military asset management for now and into the future.

The Colombian conflict and its extension into the global community represent a major dilemma for the United States at a time when this country is engaged in a great world-wide terrorist war. The logic of the dilemma is that Colombia’s security and stability are very fragile. That must be and is being addressed. The “balloon” effect of dealing

exclusively with the Colombian situation, however, is allowing instability and insecurity to bulge out elsewhere, and is weakening neighboring regimes. An insecure and unstable hemisphere limits U.S. possibilities in the global security arena. Thus, the United States must balance support for Colombia with efforts to enhance regional security. This takes us back to where we began—broader security concerns. The intent of this new series of monographs and the upcoming conference is to recognize and respond to the strategic realities of the current situation, and reframe *Plan Colombia* and related policy and strategy in a new context.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to join with the North-South Center in offering Dr. Millett's monograph as part of our ongoing attempt to clarify the issues regarding the Colombian crisis, focus the debate, and learn from it. That international security debate is critically important to the vital interests of the United States, Colombia, the hemisphere, and the global community.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
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PREFACE

As this country's leadership focuses on homeland security, it is important that we look to our own Western Hemisphere. Terrorism does not solely originate in the Middle East. Colombia's multifaceted conflicts are by no means confined to that country, a fact long appreciated by civilian and military strategists who are engaged in the search for solutions there. Professor Richard L. Millett documents succinctly in this monograph how the spillover from Colombia affects each of the five countries on its border (Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, and Brazil), as well as those somewhat more distant (Bolivia, Paraguay, and the Caribbean states).

When the U.S. Army War College and the North-South Center organized a second conference on Colombia early in 2002, a primary objective was to analyze Colombia as an "exporter of insecurity" (a phrase of Juan Gabriel Tokatlián's)—now a matter of serious hemispheric concern. Colombia cannot be ignored or minimized, as it tends to be in the highest-level inter-American deliberations. If any of the broad, ambitious hemispheric projects, such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), are to succeed, a common concern must be held for Colombia's conflicts. They will get in the way of the FTAA whether the trade negotiators realize it or not.

It is not just a question of extraterritorial armed combat across borders by Colombia's guerrilla groups, the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the rightist Auto Defensas Unificadas de Colombia (AUC), classified by Washington as "terrorists" and known also to be into drug trafficking. The growth of criminal organizations associated with the drug trade, the flow of refugees from Colombia, and the undermining of the national defense forces of all of Colombia's neighbors are the result of the spillover.

Millett reminds us that there is no purely military solution to the Colombian conflict. He also points out, however, that there is no solution without a meaningful military component. The stakes are huge in terms of the sustainability of democratic governance and of regional stability in a large portion of the hemisphere.

Despite the large sums appropriated by the United States toward *Plan Colombia*, no one, including Millett, has suggested that the trendline has yet turned positive. Although it seems difficult for the United States to give concentrated attention beyond the Middle East, security in the Western Hemisphere needs new focus, given present circumstances. In view of the vital importance of the spillover effects of the Colombia conflict on U.S. political, economic, and security interests, the North-South Center intends to devote a greater share of its resources to this issue. Through commissioned papers, policy briefings, and educational outreach activities, the Center will address spillover effects in key areas such as economic growth, political stability, migration, regional economic integration, and the future of hemispheric security institutions.

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SUMMARY

In this monograph, Dr. Richard L. Millett succinctly documents how the “spillover” from the ongoing crisis in Colombia effects each of the five countries on its porous borders—as well as somewhat more distant states and regions. The author reminds us that this is not just a question of extraterritorial armed combat across frontiers with greedy illegal drug traffickers, leftist insurgents, and rightist paramilitary groups.

In today’s global village, there is no such thing as a purely national crisis or a purely military conflict. Every conflict has global political, economic, social, and security implications ranging from trade disruption to the growth of criminal organizations to refugee flows to violent clashes to local and regional political instability. Conditions of instability also undermine efforts to nurture democracy and free-market economies, and to install anything approaching the rule of law and human rights. Moreover, no single nation can confront these problems alone.

This takes us back to where Dr. Millett began—broader security concerns. The bottom-line solution to the problem presented in this monograph is straightforward. It is incumbent on Colombia and the broader hemispheric and global community to come together and collectively confront the emerging alliance between organized crime, terrorism, and the politics and economics of violence.

COLOMBIA'S CONFLICTS: THE SPILLOVER EFFECTS OF A WIDER WAR

Introduction.

In today's global village there is no such thing as a purely national crisis. Every conflict has spillover effects, ranging from trade disruptions to refugee flows to violent clashes. In the past it was common for nations to believe that promoting conflict in neighboring states could somehow enhance their security, but in the 21st century it has become increasingly obvious that conflicts in one nation constitute a security threat to all who share common borders. Today, it is more often the weakness rather than the strength of states which threatens to disrupt the search for peace and stability.

Compounding the problem is what Ambassador Clovis Maksud of American University has described as "the CNNization of the world." A globalized media communications network ensures that violent conflicts almost anywhere are instantly communicated to neighboring nations, often in a manner designed to maximize shock and fear. Popular apprehensions are magnified, increasing political pressures for governments to respond to the situation, in the process inextricably mixing political and security concerns. The current conflicts in Colombia and their impact on and the responses by Colombia's neighbors present a graphic example of this problem. Colombian scholar Juan Gabriel Tokatlían noted that Colombia has "become an exporter of insecurity . . . , a source of governmental insecurity and prospective danger."¹ Colombia's former Defense Minister, Rafael Pardo, echoed Tokatlían's view, adding that the conflict was "boiling over" as "guerrillas kidnap Venezuelans and Ecuadorians, the paramilitaries smuggle weapons from bases along the Panamanian border; and hundreds of citizens from dozens

of foreign countries are taken hostage annually.” As a result, Pardo concluded, “Colombia has become a serious security threat not only to the Andean region, but to the broader hemisphere as well.”²

Concerns about the impact of Colombia’s conflicts and about U.S. efforts to pursue its “war on drugs” in that nation are broadly shared. When Latin America’s Roman Catholic Bishops met in Bogota, Colombia, in July 2000, bishops from Ecuador, Venezuela, and Brazil took the opportunity to voice their concerns about the growing impact of Colombia’s conflicts on their societies. They cited refugee flows, narcotics trafficking, kidnappings, and even clashes with police and military units as examples of the increasingly destructive impacts in frontier regions.³ These concerns were reinforced a year later when the United Nation’s High Commissioner for Refugees warned of the potential for a “severe humanitarian crisis with a flood of refugees pouring into neighboring nations, most notably Ecuador and Venezuela.”⁴

Such concerns are not confined to neighboring nations. An August meeting of senior security officials of Central American devoted considerable attention to the danger that escalated conflict within Colombia could “push those engaged in the processing and shipment of narcotics” into Central America, with Nicaragua’s Defense Minister adding, “Our countries would be ideal nests enabling these people to come here and take over territories once more, bringing the Colombian problem to our region.”⁵ Rumors of the presence of Colombian guerrillas and narcotraffickers have surfaced in nations as distant as Paraguay, where word of an active FARC presence was widespread in 2002. Concerns about spillover effects extend beyond Latin America. European political leaders have repeatedly expressed their fears of a spreading conflict. Even stronger expressions of concern have come from human rights organizations in Europe and the United States. Perhaps less predictable and therefore more significant have been statements made by U.S. officials. U.S. Army War College

Professors Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schulz emphasized that “the very weakness of Colombia as a nation-state threatens international order in the region and the well-being of any number of countries.”⁶ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director George Tenet told the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2001 “as we make progress against the FARC and the drug trafficking organizations . . . it’s going to spill over into those countries. . . . This amoeba will just migrate.”⁷ His comments reinforced the earlier observation of Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering that “The issue of spillover is real. . . . I have talked of the balloon effect and others have: that is if you push in one end it is bound to bulge out on others.”⁸

All of this underscores a major dilemma for U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere. The Colombian conflict represents the greatest security issue in the region. Dealing with its tangled roots, multiple facets and international dimensions presents a special challenge, especially since most military analysts and civilian political leaders rule out direct American military intervention. Strengthening Colombia’s ability to prosecute the war is obviously a key element, but in the regional context such potential good news for Colombia could spell bad news for its neighbors as illegal armed elements and criminal organizations would certainly then attempt to transfer more of their operations across borders. Balancing support for Colombia with efforts to enhance regional security will be a daunting challenge.

Background.

Internal violence is nothing new to Colombia. The current conflict has its roots in the 1947-58 period of civil strife known as *la Violencia*, an epoch of savage partisan slaughter that may have claimed as many as 200,000 lives.⁹ The line between political violence and criminality has also long been blurred in the Colombian context, a situation exacerbated in recent years by the flourishing narcotics

trade. While international criminal elements have long taken advantage of the fertile environment afforded them by Colombia's prolonged civil conflicts, they did not create this environment, and it would continue to exist even if their activities were eliminated. Much of the criminal activity is domestic. Colombia leads the world in kidnappings, is the center of counterfeiting in the hemisphere, and has long been plagued by high levels of violent common crime.

Such activities have been an integral part of internal political conflicts and those engaged in such conflicts have rarely drawn any meaningful distinction between legal and illegal means of financing their activities. All of the major armed illegal groups, the left wing Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) and the right-wing paramilitary United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), engage in and increasingly depend on income from criminal actions.

The Colombian state has never exercised effective control over much of its national territory and nothing approaching the rule of law has existed in many rural areas. Rural elites have found this neither essential nor desirable, and urban elites have lacked motivation for making the effort necessary to alter this situation. Even when elements of the state have attempted to establish some sort of effective administration of justice in conflict areas, they have lacked both financial and human resources, have had little support from local populations with no experience of the state as a potentially impartial dispenser of justice, and have found rural elites suspicious of, if not positively opposed to, any extension of central authority. Border regions have especially resisted central authority, in part because smuggling operations have often been an integral part of local economies. All this complicates cross-border issues, intermixing national, regional, and international concerns, blurring distinctions between law enforcement and military operations, and magnifying the impact of Colombian developments on neighboring nations.

Colombia shares land borders with five nations: Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. In addition, its Caribbean coast and its island territories are a distinct presence in that region, the impact of which is magnified by the narcotics trafficking which passes through and over the Caribbean Sea. In each of these cases, Colombia's internal conflicts are producing a mounting array of political, diplomatic, economic, and security concerns on the part of Colombia and of its neighbors.

Colombia's neighbors reflect a variety of the spillover effects of internal conflicts. As the strength of the major insurgent groups, the FARC and ELN, and the right-wing paramilitary AUC, grew throughout the 1990s, the concerns of neighboring nations increased proportionately. Rising violence by criminal groups, combined with concerns over growing U.S. involvement, further fueled these concerns. For some the reaction was to seek closer ties with and greater support from the United States, for others it raised fears of a more aggressive American presence in the region. In each case national concerns have overwhelmed any potential for joint regional responses. Internal political and economic problems in each nation have further exacerbated the situation, making impossible any meaningful regional consensus. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the situation in each of Colombia's neighbors before making any general conclusions about the current spillover effects and potential future developments.

Venezuela.

Perhaps the most complex and divisive case is that in Venezuela. For decades Venezuela viewed the Colombian state as a potential, if not actual, threat. Border disputes, largely in the Gulf of Venezuela, were major factors. Colombia held a similar view of Venezuela, as evidenced by its opposition to the U.S. sale of F-16 combat jets to Venezuela during the 1980s. But in the 1990s Venezuela became increasingly preoccupied with Colombia's weakness

rather than its strength, and some Colombians saw a Venezuelan military buildup along their border as more of an aid to dealing with the insurgents than as a threat to national security. Several clashes between insurgent forces, both FARC and ELN, and Venezuelan security units demonstrated the growing instability in the border region. The situation was further complicated by increased narcotics trafficking across the border and a greater tide of Colombian refugees. By the end of 1998 nearly three million Colombians were living in Venezuela, and more sectors of the public identified them with the nation's rising crime rate.¹⁰ Under the administration of President Rafael Caldera in Venezuela, the armed forces of both nations attempted to improve communications and, to the extent possible, coordinate their actions. Venezuela even encouraged increased colonization of border areas, notably in the state of Apure, subsidizing housing and farms, and increasing the military presence in the state from 1,500 to 5,000.¹¹

Venezuelan involvement in the conflict began to change in February 1999 when Colonel Hugo Chavez was inaugurated as President. More sympathetic to the insurgents than his predecessors and determined to play a major role in regional politics, the new President's statements and actions regarding the conflict generated growing controversy. Even before his inauguration, Chavez had declared that he would "go wherever asked and do all he could to achieve peace in Colombia." Before his inauguration, Chavez met with Colombia's President Andres Pastrana and Cuba's Fidel Castro to discuss peace prospects, then, shortly after taking office, hosted preliminary meetings between the Colombian government and the ELN. Chavez also began to concentrate public criticism on Colombia's right-wing paramilitaries, portraying them as a threat at least equal to that posed by the guerrillas.

Any Colombian hopes that Chavez might be able to broker a deal with the insurgents rapidly were overtaken by

rising fears of his own ambitions to regional leadership and by allegations that he was sympathetic to the insurgents' cause.¹² Colombia charged that Venezuelan citizens were selling arms to the FARC and that its Air Force had overflowed Colombian territory. The Chavez administration responded by denying these accusations and, in turn, accusing Colombia of failing to secure its border and violating the human rights of Venezuelan citizens.¹³ Insurgent incursions into Venezuelan territory including the hijacking of an airplane did not seem to alter President Chavez's determination to treat the insurgents and Colombia's government as equals.¹⁴ While such efforts did nothing to advance the peace process, they did strain bilateral relations.

Relations between Colombia and Venezuela deteriorated still further in 2001. With increasing frequency, Colombian military and political leaders charged that Venezuela was providing arms and sanctuary to elements of the FARC and ELN. In January a Venezuelan National Guard unit seized a shipment of semi-automatic rifles apparently destined for the FARC.¹⁵ Cattle ranchers in Venezuela increasingly complained that they were forced to pay protection money to the FARC and ELN despite a reported "nonaggression pact" between the insurgents and the Venezuelan government. Colombian paramilitaries began to follow the FARC into Venezuela, threatening to extend their conflicts to that nation. A particular point of tension involved Venezuelan reluctance to arrest and extradite an ELN member who allegedly had led the hijacking of a Colombian commercial airliner. A meeting between Presidents Pastrana and Chavez temporarily calmed the issue, but deep levels of distrust remained.¹⁶

Opposition politicians began accusing Chavez of favoring the guerrillas and interfering in Colombian internal affairs, with former ally Francisco Arias even suggesting that the President might "be considering an armed conflict with Colombia to distract public attention from domestic policies that were not delivering results."¹⁷

Within the Venezuelan military were reports of growing discontent over the government's failure to take a strong stance against the guerrillas.

Another crisis erupted in January 2002, when Venezuelan journalists showed a video of a meeting between the FARC and Venezuelan military officers. At the same time the Colombian Air Force intercepted a Venezuelan aircraft loaded with ammunition which was apparently destined for the FARC.¹⁸ While Colombia eventually said it accepted Venezuela's explanation that the meeting was a "humanitarian effort" to obtain the release of a kidnaped Venezuelan, tensions continued to mount. Reports surfaced that Venezuelan military intelligence admitted the presence of 750 armed guerrillas in Venezuelan territory and that one unit of 500 was operating with the implicit compliance of Venezuelan authorities.¹⁹ In April Colombian General Martin Orlando Carreno charged that his troops were attacked by a FARC column which entered Colombia from Venezuela. When the Venezuelan government responded by claiming that there was no evidence that the FARC had launched an attack from Venezuelan territory, the leaders of the AUC offered to show reporters where FARC camps had been located.²⁰ Things got even more embarrassing for the Chavez administration when a FARC leader admitted that his forces had camps inside Venezuelan territory.²¹

Under such circumstances, it was hardly surprising that a few days later many Colombians, including senior government officials, seemed to welcome the coup which briefly ousted Chavez from the presidency. When Chavez was reinstated, relations deteriorated even further.²² The collapse of the peace process and the election of Alvaro Uribe as Colombia's President, combined with the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela, contributed to a climate of tension both in the frontier regions and between the two national governments.

One additional ingredient was added to this mix when Carlos Castano, leader of the AUC, announced in July that he was sending instructors to help train right-wing paramilitaries in Venezuela. The Chavez administration denied the existence of such a force and claimed that the AUC intended to make his administration a target. Local ranchers in frontier areas, however, seemed to confirm Castano's claims.²³ Should major paramilitary activity emerge in Venezuela, relations between the two nations would become even more difficult.

In addition to the activities of illegal armed groups in frontier areas, Venezuela has had to contend with the Colombian refugees. While there were only a few hundred official refugees, estimates were that between 50,000 and 75,000 Colombians were living in Venezuela in "refugee-like circumstances."²⁴ Many others had been forcibly returned by Venezuelan authorities. In August 2002, U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spokesman Kris Janowski expressed the fear that a new wave of refugees was heading for the border.²⁵ Venezuela had adopted a law for dealing with refugees in 2001 and was supposedly making preparations for handling this potential wave, but the issue was certain to exacerbate further the conditions in frontier areas.

While many Colombian and U.S. officials have harshly criticized the Chavez administration's role in the Colombia conflict, from a Venezuelan point of view, many of its actions seem readily explicable. They fit Chavez's desire to exercise regional leadership. They may provide additional leverage in dealing with ongoing territorial disputes with Colombia. Blaming Colombia's government for frontier problems plays well in Venezuelan domestic politics. His critiques of *Plan Colombia* respond to concerns by elements within the Venezuelan military that U.S. assistance may be tipping the regional balance of power in Colombia's favor.²⁶ Finally, the guerrillas have carefully cultivated Chavez's proclivities, praising his opposition to U.S. intervention and stressing the similarities between his goals and their own,

including claiming affinity with his desire to revive the “Bolivarian” heritage. At the same time, they released Venezuelan captives and reduced their clashes with Venezuelan military units, something obviously desired by the Chavez administration.²⁷ In a real sense, only by negotiating with the insurgents, who represent the real power in much of the border region, could Chavez hope to curb their incursions into Venezuelan territory. In the short run, the Chavez tilt may have achieved some success; in the long run, its impact on the conflict, on the future of Colombian-Venezuelan and Venezuelan-U.S. relations, and on Chavez’s own prospects for political survival is much more dubious. As Rand researchers Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk have noted, “Chavez’ relationship with the Colombian guerrillas is a double-edged sword. He may be able to provide political support for the guerrillas, perhaps in the guise of peacemaking, but overt support could generate a hostile regional and international reaction and perhaps undermine his position at home.”²⁸

Peru.

Peru’s involvement in Colombia’s conflicts has taken a different course. While President Chavez was showing growing sympathy for the guerrillas, Peru’s President Alberto Fujimori was criticizing the Colombian government for making concessions to the insurgents.²⁹ Guerrilla activities along the common border long have been a source of concern in Peru, while Colombia has focused on the shipment of coca from Peru to Colombia. However, neither guerrilla incursions nor refugee flows have been as serious in Peru as in Venezuela, Panama, or Ecuador, and narcotics trafficking across the border has declined, as much of the production of coca moved from Peru to Colombia. This tempered Colombian criticisms of Peru and facilitated its emergence in the 1990s as the Colombian government’s staunchest regional ally. In a series of speeches delivered to the Inter-American Defense College, the Council of the Americas, and the United Nations in 1999, Fujimori

denounced links between guerrillas and narcotics traffickers, and called for combating terrorists “without concessions.” He further announced his strengthening of forces along the border with Colombia and, while avoiding any direct advocacy of outside intervention in the Colombian conflict, declared that his forces were ready to “combat, neutralize, and capture the terrorists of the FARC and ELN.”³⁰ Actions accompanied the President’s words. Military units were shifted to border areas, and three new airstrips were constructed in the region. Meetings were arranged between Peruvian and Colombian officers to exchange intelligence on border issues, Peruvian military commanders in frontier areas met frequently with their Colombian counterparts, and reports circulated that Colombian officers were being trained in Peru. The First Vice President of Peru’s Congress even declared publicly that Peru was ready to offer more assistance if Colombia requested it.³¹

Fujimori’s fall, however, was in part the product of evidence that not all Peruvian officials were united in fighting the insurgents. Instead, his close advisor and head of the National Intelligence Service, Vladimiro Montesinos, was tied directly to 1999 shipments of 10,000 East German Kalashnikov assault rifles to the FARC. Russian and Ukrainian pilots flew from Jordan to Iquitos, Peru, then dropped the weapons to FARC units in Colombia.³² The fall of Fujimori and Montesinos evidently did not stop FARC efforts to move supplies through Peru. In October 2000, the Colombian government announced that it had seized a large shipment of ammunition made in Peru and destined for the FARC.³³

While the current Peruvian administration of President Alejandro Toledo has not been as publicly supportive of Colombia or of U.S. regional policy as was that of Fujimori, relations generally have been good. The heads of both nation’s armed forces have met and pledged mutual cooperation. Both sides have an interest in keeping the FARC from moving operations into Peruvian territory,

something that appeared increasingly likely with the collapse of the Colombian peace process. In January 2002, *Newsweek* published a story alleging that the FARC was already well-established inside Peru.³⁴ In March, FARC representatives admitted their presence but claimed it was simply temporary. However, in June, a Peruvian television program, *Contrapunto*, produced documents which showed a growing FARC presence, with some coming directly from Colombia and others entering via Ecuador.³⁵ Evidence was mounting that the FARC was determined to increase its presence in Peru and that Peru's government lacked the means and/or will to counter this threat effectively.

The specter that antinarcotics operations in Colombia may again be pushing cultivation into Peruvian territory has been of even greater concern to Peru. Evidence substantiates that this time the cultivation includes opium poppies as well as coca.³⁶ The ultimate nightmare would be if this led to ties between the FARC and the remnants of Sendero Luminoso. While not as directly threatened as Venezuela, Panama, or Ecuador by the spread of Colombia's conflicts, Peruvians were watching events across the border with growing apprehension.

Bolivia.

While not sharing a border with Colombia, Bolivia found itself facing some of the same problems as Peru. As early as 1999, there were reports of FARC activities, including recruiting efforts, in Bolivia.³⁷ Bolivia also feared that antinarcotics operations in Colombia would result in a revival of coca planting in their nation. This fear gained additional ground as traditional coca farmers, *cocaleros*, began to organize and protest the government's antinarcotics policies. The strong showing of *cocalero* leader Evo Morales in the 2002 presidential elections further fueled these fears. These concerns were compounded by evidence of FARC financing for Morales' campaign. Fragmented politics, economic recession, and growing rural

discontent all threatened to make Bolivia a fertile *ground* for the type of unrest which was plaguing Colombia's immediate neighbors.³⁸

Ecuador.

For years Ecuador escaped the worst problems connected with the Colombian conflict. The more populated sector of its frontier had been peaceful for the most part, and the refugee flow had been limited, reaching a total of about 3,500 by the end of 1998.³⁹ Narcotics trafficking was less of a problem since Ecuador neither produced nor consumed large quantities of narcotics. Freed from major internal conflicts, the military was able to maintain relative control over much of the frontier. It also cultivated friendly relations with the United States as an element of its security policy, even granting the American military the use of an Ecuadorian air base following the U.S. withdrawal from Panama.

Before 1999 Ecuadorian sources generally played down any spillover effects of Colombia's conflict and emphasized their government's ability to control frontier areas. But in February 1999, the Colombian news magazine, *Semana*, reported that the border with Ecuador had become a "strategic area for rebel logistical purposes," and that this, in turn, attracted right-wing paramilitary forces into the area. In addition, the story alleged that narcotics trafficking across the border had increased greatly in the previous 2 years, creating a "powder keg" which was "set to explode."⁴⁰

At least some confirmation of this story was provided a few days later when Ecuador began building the first of a dozen U.S.-financed counternarcotics police garrisons near the Colombian border.⁴¹ At the same time, Ecuador's military confirmed that it had increased patrols in border areas significantly to "stem problems which have already arisen" because of Colombian guerrilla activities, including 146 attacks on oil installations vital to Ecuador's economy.⁴² The intensified patrols soon found two large, but apparently

abandoned guerrilla bases in Ecuadorian territory. By August, Ecuador's Defense Minister confidently was asserting that the border with Colombia was "secure."⁴³

This level of confidence did not long endure. The following month a dozen foreigners were kidnapped in Ecuadorian territory by the FARC.⁴⁴ Again, troop reinforcements were hurried to the area, and by February, having dismantled two additional guerrilla bases, the Defense Minister could again assert that his forces had the area under control. At the same time, however, he admitted that fuel and weapons were being smuggled from Ecuador to Colombia and predicted that "the Ecuadorian people will feel the impact of the Colombian problem and we must increasingly prepare ourselves."⁴⁵

Again, confident assertions proved short-lived. In April Pablo Gariban of *Reuters* reported that FARC guerrillas had virtually taken over the border town of Puerto El Carmen. The story quoted Ecuadorian Lieutenant Colonel Fabio Espinosa as saying, "Ecuador has turned into a country that provides them [the FARC] with their most crucial needs, from recreational areas to a place where they can bring their injured for treatment." He added, "if at any given moment the FARC stopped seeing us as necessary for their logistics, it's likely that they would try to expand their territory, and we would be the ones affected."⁴⁶

By the summer of 2000 an increase in kidnappings, the capture of a nine-member FARC patrol in Ecuadorian territory, and growing fears that coca eradication efforts in Colombia would produce a wave of refugees were all contributing to rising levels of anxiety. Ecuador's Foreign Minister, Heinz Moeller, observed, "We don't want anything to do with the internal Colombian conflict other than to see a negotiated peace, but if we are left with no alternative, we will have to confront them militarily."⁴⁷

While the border situation was deteriorating, Ecuador was also experiencing serious economic and political problems. Banks failed, indigenous groups and military

units combined to oust a president, and poverty indices rose dramatically. Hundreds of thousands migrated to other nations at the same time that Colombian refugees were flowing into Ecuador.⁴⁸ As fighting flared along the border the economy of towns of the Ecuadorian side declined sharply and violence escalated. Kidnappings became more common, as did narcotics trafficking.

Ecuador's growing frustration with its efforts to contain the effects of Colombia's conflicts mirrored the experience of much of the region. When the end of the border conflict with Peru made it possible to redeploy units along the Colombian frontier, there was a brief wave of optimism that the situation could be controlled. But in short order, it became apparent that problems would likely only increase, and that Ecuador would steadily be drawn into a conflict in which it had little to gain and much to lose. By July 2000 the government was "considering declaring the border with Colombia an area of emergency," and was planning to spend up to \$200 million in the region in the next three years. According to Foreign Minister Moeller, this was aimed at "preventing what has occurred in Colombia from happening in Ecuador."⁴⁹

These efforts bore little fruit. By 2001 Colombian paramilitaries were openly battling with FARC units inside Ecuador. Some Ecuadorian citizens, threatened by the warring parties, fled from their homes.⁵⁰ In June a small ELN unit clashed with an Ecuadorian military patrol, and a few weeks later other ELN members were caught trying to kidnap a local farmer. Ecuador responded to the rising tide of crime and violence by shifting even more troops from the Peruvian to the Colombian border region and by announcing a plan to recruit 24,000 new police.⁵¹ They also began to lobby actively for increased financial support for their efforts from the United States and from Europe to strengthen border security and to deal with the growing flow of refugees.⁵²

Despite such efforts, the situation continued to deteriorate through the summer of 2002. Ecuadorians fled from the region while more Colombian refugees crossed the border. The army began locating armed insurgent camps within Ecuadorian territory. There were occasional brief clashes with groups of armed Colombians, and even one accidental exchange of fire between Ecuadorian and Colombian military units.⁵³ Despite the military buildup, guerrillas and paramilitaries continued to operate openly in much of the border region, using it for rest and for logistics. Ecuadorian military sources estimated that at least 3,000 members of Colombia's armed groups were operating in the region. The FARC even made the border city of Lago Agrio a major supply point for its purchase of propane cylinders which it converted into crude, but deadly mortars.⁵⁴

The rising tide of refugees strained Ecuador's already limited resources. By the end of 2001 there were 4,300 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, almost all from Colombia. In addition, an estimated 30,000 Colombians were "living in Ecuador in refugee-like circumstances."⁵⁵ The UNHCR warned in 2002 that this number could grow by 11,000 in a six-month period, should fighting intensify.⁵⁶

With its own economy deteriorating, facing rising ethnic tensions and popular protests over oil company activities near the border region, and a presidential election with no clear favorite looming, Ecuador is hard-pressed to deal with the rising crisis on the border. As Sandra Edwards of the Washington Office on Latin America has observed:

With the establishment of U.S. troops at its coastal air base in Manta and the violence between paramilitaries and guerillas increasing at an alarming rate . . . Ecuador's position in the region is slowly losing the appearance of neutrality. Whether it wants to or not, Ecuador may eventually become an active regional player on the stage of both the Colombian conflict and the U.S. war on terrorism.⁵⁷

Panama.

In the view of those in the United States, concerned about issues of Panama Canal security in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal, the spillover of Colombia's conflicts into Panama represents a particularly serious threat. Panamanians have tended to downplay this, noting that the border with Colombia is remote from any installations related to the Canal and pointing out that it was clearly in the guerrillas interest to abstain from any actions which might provide an excuse for direct U.S. military actions against them. Rand analysts Rabasa and Chalk largely concur, pointing out that "the constraints against a guerrilla move against Panama or the Canal are largely political," but adding that if the Colombian government "succeeded in putting real pressure on the guerrillas," this might change their calculations.⁵⁸ Of all the bordering nations, Panama is the most vulnerable, having neither regular armed forces nor direct land connections with the border region, a long history of the usage of Panamanian territory by Colombian narcotraffickers, and a lack of any real capacity to control its land, sea, or air frontiers.

Panama's problems have three distinct, but interrelated aspects. The first are the actions of armed Colombians, insurgents, and/or paramilitaries in its national territory. The second encompasses the wide range of criminal activities, notably, but by no means exclusively, narcotics trafficking, linked to Colombian organized crime. Finally, problems are caused by refugees moving into the Darien, representing a threat both to local inhabitants and to the region's fragile ecological balance. All of this not only undermines Panama's control over its remote Darien Province, it also contains the potential seriously to disrupt relations with the United States.

This situation has developed while Panama, for the first time in its history, has become fully responsible for its own national security. As Linda Robinson of *U.S. News and*

World Report has observed, the growing spillover of Colombia's conflicts comes "at an unpropitious time for Panama."⁵⁹ The withdrawal of the last U.S. military units at the end of 1999 gave this nation a responsibility for which it had neither experience nor adequate forces. The Public Force (PF) which had replaced the old Defense Forces, abolished following the 1989 U.S. invasion, is essentially a police force with very limited air and sea components. It has no heavy weapons, very limited logistical and communications capabilities, and largely inexperienced leadership.

For a variety of reasons, during most of the 1990s Panama tried to downplay its problems in the Darien. Discussing the deteriorating situation risked scaring potential foreign investors, emphasized the problems inherent in the decision to abolish the military, and risked weakening Panama's position as it negotiated the possibility of an extension of the U.S. military presence. The response in this period to emerging threats from Colombia might be characterized as strategic avoidance. Public Force units were pulled back at least 15 kilometers from the frontier and encouraged to avoid contact with armed Colombian units from whatever source.⁶⁰ Given the undoubted superiority of the Colombians, whether guerrillas or paramilitaries, in combat skills and equipment, this strategy was not altogether unreasonable.

Predictably, the Colombian presence on Panamanian soil steadily expanded. The guerrillas found remote Darien villages ideal locations for rest and recreation, but where the guerrillas went the paramilitaries followed. In 1997 reports surfaced that paramilitary commanders were offering \$2,000 for each guerrilla killed in Panama.⁶¹

In June 1999, Panamanian television showed Colombian guerrillas marching through a Darien town, and the government was forced to publicly acknowledge the threat and dispatch additional forces to the border. Trying to explain the shift in policy, Interior Minister Mariela

Sagel said that, while border crossings had been going on for 25 years, paramilitaries now “have threatened the Panamanian townspeople with death if they continue selling supplies to the rebels. The peaceful coexistence has ended.”⁶²

The reinforced Panamanian presence did little to slow the escalation of conflict. In November the FARC hijacked two helicopters in San Blas Province. A few days later a clash between guerrillas and paramilitaries destroyed 10 Panamanian homes.⁶³ As a result of the escalating violence, public school teachers in the Darien asked the government to suspend classes, and the Bishop of Darien, Romulo Emiliani, declared that “armed groups have transformed our peaceful province. Now kidnaping and assault have become as common here as in Colombia.”⁶⁴

In December 1999, heavy fighting near the border caused over 300 refugees to pour into the Darien, further exacerbating the region’s problems. By March 2000 the number had reached 500, and Panama began urging Colombia to accept their repatriation.⁶⁵ The situation continued to deteriorate, and in September Bishop Emiliani fled to the United States following death threats from the FARC. In an interview the Bishop noted that the FARC and AUC moved freely in the Darien, “buying food, weapons, everything they need. They pay with drugs, and the drugs stay in Central America.”⁶⁶

Panama’s government continued to appear largely impotent in the face of these mounting threats. As Angel Rabasa and Peter Chalk observed, Panamanian strategy was evidently “to maintain a presence in the main town in Darien Province to provide static protection to the population, but without attempting to control the border . . . or to confront the guerrillas.”⁶⁷ The consequences of such actions became clear in 2001 when Colombians, probably from the AUC, attacked the small village of Nazare where the FARC had been buying supplies, burning much of the town and killing a young girl in the process.⁶⁸

Problems generated by the Colombian conflict were by no means confined to the Darien. Reports increasingly circulated of the FARC's presence in the area of Colon, on the Caribbean end of the Canal. In June 2000 a joint operation between Panamanian and Colombian forces seized a vessel loaded with arms in the Atlantic port of Coco Solo. A second vessel evidently escaped.⁶⁹ This shipment represented just a tiny portion of arms allegedly being shipped through Panama to both guerrilla and paramilitary forces in Colombia. Guerrillas, paramilitaries, and narcotics traffickers found Panama a convenient place for doing business and making contacts. There were even reports that the AUC was forming Panamanian paramilitary units in Colon to join in the fight against the guerrillas,⁷⁰ and that the FARC was using banks in Panama to deposit and launder much of the money generated by its criminal activities.⁷¹ The preliminary draft of a U.S. Customs Intelligence Report noted that Panama remained a major transshipment point for narcotics and a significant source for money laundering. Panama's security forces were described as "corrupt," "ill-trained," and "overwhelmed."⁷²

In April 2002, the credibility of Panamanian efforts to control arms trafficking and avoid involvement in the Colombian conflict was further undermined by reports that a shipment of 3000 AK-47 assault rifles supposedly purchased from Nicaragua for the Panamanian Public Force had actually been shipped to the AUC. The links to this transaction began with two Israeli arms dealers based in Guatemala who worked out a deal which would exchange the AK-47s, plus bayonets and five million rounds of ammunition, for Uzi submachine-guns and Jerico pistols made in Israel. The dealers gave the Nicaraguans a February 10 purchase order bearing the signatures of four senior Panamanian officials. In October 2001 the bayonets were air-freighted to Miami, while the AK-47s and ammunition were loaded on a Nicaraguan vessel with a manifest assigning them to Colon. Instead the vessel sailed to the Colombian port of Turbo where it unloaded its cargo,

designating it as plastic balls. The AUC later admitted receiving the shipment.⁷³ Since the transaction was revealed, Nicaragua and Panama have each blamed the other. In June the Organization of American States set up a Commission headed by former U.S. Ambassador to Colombia, Morris Busby, to investigate the entire matter.⁷⁴

All of this has posed a set of major dilemmas for the administration of President Mireya Moscoso, which took power in September 1999. Committed to not allowing foreign military bases and to providing increased social benefits for poorer Panamanians, it lacked both the resources and the will needed to confront the issues generated by Colombia's conflicts. Suggestions by some Panamanian officials that an Inter-American force be created to police the Darien received a cold reception. The Moscoso administration, with its approval ratings plunging and its economy in recession, was unable or unwilling to do anything to establish effective control over the Darien or curb the use of Panama by Colombia's illegally armed groups for logistics and financial transactions. Yet, failing to address these issues threatened to undermine relations with the United States and damage the economy. Efforts to develop a new national defense strategy seemed based as much on wishful thinking as on any realistic assessment of threats and capabilities. According to Panamanian journalist Berta Thayer, the Colombian border remains "thoroughly permeable and impossible to control," and the nation's only real option is to try to "bend in the wind."⁷⁵ There seemed little reason to expect that the situation in the Darien would improve and Panamanians could only hope that the damage would be limited in the rest of the country.

Brazil.

The impact of Colombia's conflicts on Brazil have been considerably less dramatic. This reflects two basic factors, the relative isolation and lack of population along the 1,644 kilometer common border, and the large size and relative

power of Brazil. The affected area is also far distant from Brazil's economic and population centers which helps limit media coverage. But, despite these factors, the Colombian situation has become the subject of growing concern in Brazil, in good part because of increased narcotics trafficking.

As early as 1996, in terms obviously aimed at Colombia, Brazil's national security doctrine recognized the problems posed by what it described as "adjacent areas of instability" afflicted by the operations of "armed bands," and "transnational crime."⁷⁶ The Brazilian military presence in the region was strengthened, but much of the border still remained essentially uncontrolled. As a result, Colombian troops were able to transit Brazilian territory in November 1998 as part of their response to a FARC assault on the nearby Colombian city of Mitu.⁷⁷ This produced a brief crisis in bilateral relations and contributed to a Brazilian reevaluation of the border situation. The military presence was further strengthened, and by the fall of 1999 an 8,000-man Army battalion was stationed in the region, supported by additional Marine, Navy, and Air Force units. In 2000 the Brazilian military initiated "Operation Cobra" (name drawn from the first letters of Colombia and Brazil), designed to combine an increase in Federal Police presence in the region with the positioning of a highly mobile army unit supported by helicopters.⁷⁸ This was backed up by a \$1.2 billion "Amazon Surveillance System" combining radar and aircraft to track activities in the region.⁷⁹ According to one Brazilian military source, this represented both an effort to continue a policy of nonintervention in Colombia's conflict and a growing fear that U.S.-supported escalation of the conflict could push it into Brazilian territory.⁸⁰ This increased force has evidently had some success. In March 2002 Brazilian military units moved against suspected FARC camps in their territory, producing an armed encounter with a FARC unit which was wiped out.⁸¹

Efforts to control the border have been complicated by disputes between Federal police and military units over

responsibilities in antinarcotics operations. In May 1999 the former commander of Federal Police in Amazonas State testified before the Brazilian Congress that there were only 15 police agents assigned to antinarcotics operations in the state.⁸² The same month a Brazilian Government report called the border region “lawless,” and called for the signing of joint agreements with Colombia and Peru to combat narcotics trafficking.⁸³

In August 1999, Brazil intercepted a plane loaded with weapons traveling from Suriname to Colombia. In a speech to the Armed Forces a few days later, Brazil’s President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, stressed the dangers in the emergence of “zones of instability” and declared that “drug trafficking and other illicit cross-border activities threaten our people and our sovereignty.” But, he also stressed that “the Armed Forces are not to be used on an everyday basis in these battles, except to support the police.”⁸⁴ This speech was quickly followed by the announcement that the Federal Police would begin an operation to block routes used to transport food from Brazil to areas of Colombia controlled by the FARC.⁸⁵ Brazilian and Colombian officials also began to cooperate in destroying clandestine airstrips in the border region.

In 2001, several prominent leaders of Brazilian organized crime, involved in smuggling arms into Brazil and drugs into Brazil, were captured in Colombia. This followed a Brazilian Congressional investigation which found that Brazilian narcotraffickers were selling large amounts of sophisticated weapons to the FARC, and with the connivance of hundreds of Brazilian officials, transporting them through the Amazon basin.⁸⁶ This underscored the growing importance of Brazil as a link in the international narcotics trade and the rising levels of domestic narcotics consumption. For Brazilian authorities, the problem was expanding from its primary focus on defending national sovereignty in the Amazon Basin to include a growing concern about escalating international criminal influences throughout the nation.

Operations continue to be hampered by problems of jurisdiction and coordination between military and police units, by local corruption, and by limited resources. Meanwhile trafficking in arms and narcotics through or over Brazilian territory has generated growing concern. In a military sense, Brazil has sufficient force to discourage any significant use of its territory by either guerrillas or paramilitaries. Problems are unlikely ever to approach the scale of those currently experienced in Venezuela, Ecuador, or Panama. But the problem remains serious both for those living in the region and for Brazil's relations with the region and with the United States. President Cardoso's chief security advisor has said, "For Brazil Colombia is causing the biggest worry. Our attention is dedicated to the effects it could have on Brazil like the flight of guerrillas and the transfer of (drug) laboratories and plantations."⁸⁷

The Caribbean and Central America.

As noted previously, arms trafficking between Suriname and Colombia is an ongoing issue, with weapons destined both for the right-wing paramilitaries of Carlos Castano and for the FARC. Some of the weapons may have come from Surinamese military stores, others come from as far away as Russia and China.⁸⁸ Another flourishing arms for drugs route has been established through Central America. Weapons from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua are being shipped to guerrillas, paramilitaries, and narcotics dealers by both air and sea routes, some of which transit Panama and/or Honduras. These shipments, which allegedly include surface-to-air missiles, are frequently paid for in drugs rather than cash, adding to narcotics trafficking problems in Central America.⁸⁹

The Caribbean has long had direct links with both narcotics trafficking from and arms trafficking to Colombia. As long ago as 1988, a major shipment of arms destined for the FARC was seized in Jamaica.⁹⁰ To these problems must now be added those caused by the growing flight of

Colombians to other nations, a flight often facilitated by organized criminal groups. Growing pressures by the United States on smaller Caribbean nations to curb these activities, coupled with the corrupting effect of both the vast amounts of money and the ever-present threats of force coming out of Colombia, represent a major threat to sovereignty and democratic institutions in the region.

Even Mexico has not been immune to the impact of Colombia's conflicts. Ties between Colombian and Mexican organized crime have undermined the administration of justice and placed strains on relations with the United States. While still Governor of Guanajuato, Mexico's President, Vincente Fox, began warning that his nation was "undergoing a process of Colombianization in which government officials and organized crime act in collusion."⁹¹

Colombia and the "War on Terrorism."

This danger of "Colombianization" concerns much of the hemisphere. Virtually all nations hope for a negotiated settlement which will end the fighting, curb arms trafficking and the flows of refugees, and weaken the power of criminal groups. But with the collapse of the peace process and the prospect of an escalated conflict, this hope has receded greatly. Instead the focus has shifted to dealing with the dangers of an escalated conflict. These are by no means confined to the direct impact of cross-border operations by illegal armed groups. Fears are that both antinarcotics operations and drug production may damage ecological systems, that waves of refugees will strain resources and exacerbate domestic economic problems, that U.S. policies will detract attention from other regional issues and prove divisive in bilateral relations, and that rising cross-border criminal activity will further promote domestic political corruption and undermine government credibility. In a period in which each of Colombia's neighbors faces mounting political and economic problems, these prospects seem especially daunting.

The situation is further complicated by the post-September 11th U.S. focus on the “war on terrorism.” The FARC, ELN, and AUC have all been added to the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. While the extent of their threat when compared to groups like Al Qaeda is certainly debatable, there is no denying their growing international connections and reach. The revelation that IRA agents were involved in training the FARC, most likely in urban terrorism, strengthened international support for Colombia and further undermined FARC claims to political legitimacy.⁹² Combined with evidence of FARC ties to the Basque terrorist group ETA and reports of its hiring ex-Yugoslav military as trainers, this bolstered Bogota’s claims that it was facing a terrorist threat rather than any legitimate political challenge.⁹³ While the “war on terrorism” lends credibility to the Colombian government’s cause and undermines the legitimacy of the illegal armed opposition, it also risks the danger of failing to give sufficient attention to the purely domestic factors which produced and sustain this conflict. The use of terror tactics has been largely confined to Colombia, with infrequent spillovers into neighboring states. The agenda of all three groups is overwhelmingly domestic and the ultimate solutions to the threats they pose will have to be largely domestic as well. The “war on terrorism” has served to raise the profile of Colombia’s conflicts, especially their international dimensions, but it has not significantly advanced the search for solutions.

Future Prospects.

Despite his public rejection of any suggestion that “we are a threat to our neighbors,” President Pastrana found his dealings with neighboring states dominated by issues related to Colombia’s internal conflicts.⁹⁴ This situation will likely continue in the Uribe administration. Even before his inauguration, the new President visited all the neighboring South American states, seeking greater efforts to seal the borders against narcotics trafficking, arms dealing, and

incursions by illegal armed groups. While providing opportunities for face-to-face contacts and generating statements of understanding and support, there is little evidence that these visits generated any concrete results.⁹⁵ No consensus exists among these states as to how they and/or Colombia can best confront these issues. All fear an escalation and expansion of existing conflicts; none seem to have a coherent strategy for reversing these trends. They also have demonstrated little ability to work together to confront issues arising from the Colombian situation. Above all, no tradition of or effective mechanism exists for promoting regional security efforts when confronted by a civil conflict in a neighboring state. A July 2002 report in a Brazilian newspaper outlining a supposed plan to create a regional military force to aid Colombia elicited a prompt series of denials by regional governments of any intention to participate in such a force. Even Colombia's outgoing President Pastrana quickly disavowed any interest in the creation of a multinational force.⁹⁶ Division, rather than cooperation, characterizes the reaction of Colombia's neighbors. As Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) has observed, "Colombia's problems are having a profound impact on the stability and security of the entire region, yet there is little or no sustained regional support for Colombia's efforts to deal with the narcoterrorist threat."⁹⁷

Conclusions.

The Colombian crisis demonstrates the continuing evolution of threats to national security. Today many of the greatest threats are generated by the growing nexus between internal political violence and international criminal activities. These exist around the world, as exemplified by situations in areas as diverse as Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. There seems to be little difference in the relationships, regardless of whether the conflicts are the result of ethnic divisions, religious conflicts, political ideology, or simply fear and ambition. The result is more the proliferation of lawlessness than the

spread of terrorism. Today criminal activities, both international (narcotics trafficking, arms and people smuggling, money laundering) and domestic (kidnappings, extortion, robberies), have become the essential life blood of most insurgent and terrorist movements. The challenge for the governments threatened, for the United States, and for the world community is how to sever these links. Failure to do so can reduce nation-states to the position of pawns rather than principal actors in the violence which threatens to engulf them.

A reflection of this is the increasing tendency by many to privatize security. The rich turn to private security guards, the poor to lynchings, and the administration of justice becomes increasingly discredited. In such an atmosphere, the rise of paramilitary forces is hardly surprising. Indeed, as exemplified by AUC activities in Panama and Venezuela, the exportation of paramilitary violence may be becoming easier and more common than the spread of ideologically driven insurgencies.

While the spillover of Colombia's conflicts has exacerbated the problems of the region significantly and has reduced the resources available to confront mounting political and economic dilemmas, it is by no means the principal cause of these problems. The economies and/or the political leadership of every one of Colombia's neighbors are in jeopardy. In part, this stems from global economic problems further fueled by volatile commodity prices, the U.S. recession and the Argentine economic collapse, declines in investor confidence, and the difficulties of adjusting to a globalized economy. Even more, it reflects the failure of political leadership, dogged by traditions of corruption and divisive politics.

In Ecuador and Brazil, no party can count on a majority in Congress, and high levels of uncertainty cloud upcoming presidential elections. The governments in Peru and Panama must deal with the heritage of past corruption, with a growing perception of them as weak and

incompetent, and with steadily declining levels of popular support. In Venezuela, President Chavez came to power largely because of a massive public rejection of the traditional political class, but he has become a symbol of divisiveness instead of unity, facing the constant threat of ouster by constitutional or by unconstitutional means.

This mix of political and economic crisis provides the fertile ground in which the alliance of political and criminal violence thrives. It undermines efforts to stabilize democracy and install anything approaching the rule of law. An August 2002 poll showed this trend widespread throughout Latin America. Citizens increasingly blamed the political class for their problems and half said they “wouldn’t mind if an authoritarian government came to power.” Support for free market economics also showed a sharp decline.⁹⁸

Venezuela’s political crisis is the ultimate wild card in efforts to promote any regional response to Colombia’s conflicts. Until that is resolved, finding any common agenda will be nearly impossible. Brazil’s regional power ambitions, combined with its suspicions of any outside involvement in the Amazon Basin, the traditional enmity between Peru and Ecuador and between Venezuela and Colombia, and the extreme weakness of the Panamanian security apparatus, are also obstacles which will be difficult to overcome. For the United States, this means that military assistance and training, while necessary, are by themselves insufficient to address the regional issues. Political issues must be addressed if real progress is to be made in the security arena.

The ongoing conflict demonstrates the limited ability of the Colombian military to carry out missions related to the defense of national sovereignty and the control of border areas.⁹⁹ This comes at a time in which the ability of any state to control its frontiers has been undermined by the emergence of a globalized economy and information system. Dr. Stephen Flynn, Senior Fellow for National Security at

the Council on Foreign Relations, has noted that “borders can no longer be effectively policed without seriously disrupting the flow of peoples and goods that is so central to the functioning of the global economy.” He concludes “if tighter controls are adopted, they create powerful incentives for corruption.”¹⁰⁰ Lacking any consensus between Colombia and its neighbors as to the nature of or solutions to the threats emanating from the civil conflict, prospects for exercising meaningful control over frontier areas are dismal at best.

It is a truism that there is no military solution to the Colombian crisis. It is also true that there is no solution without a meaningful military component. The same statements apply to the regional situation. No single nation can confront the emerging security threats alone. External sources such as the United States can provide training and equipment, encourage collaboration, and improve communications and intelligence. But ultimately none of this will make much difference if the requisite political will is absent, if the heritage of the past continues to block the needed cooperation of the present, and if the broader international community is not able to come together and effectively confront the emerging alliance between organized crime and the politics of violence.

While levels of civil conflict approaching those of Colombia are unlikely to extend to any neighboring states at least in the near future, increased violence and insecurity, complicated by rising tides of refugees, are likely and spillover effects of Colombia’s conflicts will remain a dominant item on regional agendas. If this trend is not reversed, the United States could find itself increasingly drawn into a growing conflict without meaningful borders. Refugee flows would grow, spreading far beyond the region. Criminal organizations would thrive, magnifying the problems already faced by the United States and the rest of the developed world. National security concerns and resources would increasingly turn southward. Over-

whelmed regional governments would be able to do less and less in their own defense.

None of this is inevitable, but all of it is possible. Avoiding it depends on the credibility of U.S. commitments to strengthen the victims as well as to pursue the perpetrators. There must be real economic alternatives available to those caught up in spreading activities of criminalized enterprises. It requires promoting the rule of law and the administration of justice as an alternative to privatized security and personal vengeance. It necessitates recognition of and adjustment for the balloon effect which will inevitably accompany any success in dealing with the illegal armed actors. It involves neither asking too much nor accepting too little from Colombia's neighbors and from the Colombian state itself. U.S. military assistance to its neighbors is critical, but the United States taking responsibility for their security would be disastrous. The challenge is daunting, the risks of failure are immense.

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